

# The Marriage That Was Arranged

By BERTA RUCK

In Which a Well Meaning Auntie Stirs Up Trouble, and Dan Capid, Aided by Fate, Wins Easy Victory.

GHAST, a girl sat staring at the morning paper. The breakfast table at which she sat was bright with yellow narcissus blossoms, and in a shallow crystal bowl full of sunshine, the room full of dainty appointments, empty of anything that would speak of a man in the house.

The girl was twenty-five, well but unattractively dressed, and good looking. She might have been extremely pretty had there been any one to notice it. Notice, to beauty, being even as sunlight to the narcissus. Can't bloom without it. Sometimes the girl herself fancied that her eyes were nice, though nobody had told her so.

As for what they were now staring at, there was this announcement:

A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Sybil, daughter of the late General and Mrs. Ashton of the Lower Beach, Maidenhead, and niece of Miss Ashton of 113 Beal street, and Arthur Wye, Esq., eldest son of the late Colonel and Mrs. Wye, Thornton Hall, Shropshire.

"Good heavens," gasped the girl. "Auntie!" For the other woman in the house was one of these meek maiden aunts left over from the nineteenth century. Gray hair not and gray skin skirt, silver gleam of eyeglass chain, library catalogue.

She put down the list of the latest fiction and in her characteristically nervous voice inquired: "What is it, Sybil, dear?"

"Look!"

And Sybil Ashton, with an indignant gesture, handed over the paper. Her thumb marked the announcement of her own forthcoming marriage—the first the girl had ever heard of it.

At that same moment and at a breakfast table in bachelor rooms some streets away a young man sat equally aghast staring at his own copy of the Post.

"Good Lord," he muttered. "What the—?" Then louder, "I'm dashed!"

Then, "Or am I imagining it? . . . Girls, my only love, will you listen to this?"

He proceeded to read aloud, slowly and distinctly, the notice beginning "A marriage has been arranged—"

His invariable breakfast table companion was curled up in the lazy chair opposite to him, her ivory satin coat, rose lined, gleaming over all her shapely curves. Girlie, best bred and most infatuate of bull terriers, kept one triangular white ear cocked for every note of the beloved's voice; both jeweled eyes fastened upon him.

Good to look upon, certainly, was this young master of hers, lounging graceful and big limbed in the type of bathrobe with which men compensate themselves for the drab and dreary vesture of their business lives. (This garment was of lemon-yellow silk, patterned in swirls of impudent jade green, petunia pink, and cinnabar purple.) A slacker? No . . . Just taking things a little easily, perhaps, these days—after those strenuous years!

Not much incentive to work at present. No responsibilities now—but his mercilessly groomed brown hair was streaked with the premature white that's so often seen among the young ex-fighters of our generation; shrapnel souvenirs. The possibility was there that since the twenties of this young man had been all too full of action, the thirties might find him lacking—the forties would see him fat, disillusioned, unfulfilled.

No hint of middle age, though, as yet, in his pleasant, laughing voice . . .

"Girlie, how on earth has this happened?" it demanded, when the announcement had been read through to the end. "A marriage—mine! After I've told you—not once and again, but again and again—that you're the one member of your sex who's ever going to be allowed to sit opposite to me at breakfast, here's some wicked person, girlie, trying to oust you from your lawful place. Mistake, of course. But how the deuce did it get in? Somebody must have—"

Here he broke snap off. His good looking face froze into blankness again as another aspect of the question broke upon him. A serious one.

"Good Lord!"

"In the Post."

"Everybody'd see the dashed thing . . . everybody who knew him would—"

"Pp . . . rrrrrrr!" sounded the telephone bell on his writing table.

The young man stretched out a long gaudy sleeved arm to pick up the receiver. Then checked himself abruptly.

"Frith—" he called aloud.

"Sir," responded the voice of his man from the meticulous back kitchen, and there entered, in faultless civies (the late sergeant) Frith.

"Answer the telephone, will you?" requested his master. "I don't think I'm here."

"Very good, sir."

Then Frith, at the telephone, "Yes, madam, Mr. Wye's man speaking . . . Yes, it's Frith . . . In a loud tone, as to the very dead—"I am sorry, madam, Mr. Wye is not here at present. . . ."

Impassive face of man meeting eyes of master.

"Gone into the country, I believe, madam. He . . . pardon?"

Pause. The impassivity of Frith's mask changed here with a gleam of amazement.

"Then—"

"I could not tell you, madam, I am expecting a wire, any moment, to let me know when Mr. Wye will be back, and will request him to ring you up . . . I could not tell



"Now, sir, what do you mean by that?" He tapped the paper in his hand, folded at the obnoxious paragraph. "What do you mean by it?"

you, madam, indeed . . . Mr. Wye has said nothing to myself . . . Very good, madam. Good-by."

Then—

"Mrs. Anstruther, sir, wishing to congratulate you upon your engagement—"

"Good Lord, my grandmother," grunted young Wye in dismay. "None so sharp as those who can't hear. She got it first of all, did she—"

"Yes, sir," Frith took this as a question to himself. "A little upset madam seemed, not to have heard the news from yourself direct, sir." Slight hint of reproach in the tone of this confidential family servant of a rapidly disappearing school. "If I may say so—"

"Prrrr!" again, urgently.

Interlude by Frith on telephone.

"Who the dickens was that?"

"Col. Phillips, sir, left a message for you. His heartiest congratulations, and he and Mrs. Phillips are delighted to see your news, and—"

"Are they," broke from the exasperated subject of congratulation. "I suppose every soul I know will be ringing up about it for the rest of the morning? Anyhow they'll see it contradicted in all the evening papers!"

"Do I understand, sir, that the report of your—"

"Grossly exaggerated," Frith! I'm not engaged nor ever will be!"

"Sir!"

"O, go to the—to the door, Frith. There's somebody knocking. Say I've gone out, of course."

But the voice of the visitor was raised at the door of the flat; loudly, blithely, and confidently.

"O, no, you don't, Frith, yold villain. I heard him . . . Wye! Wye, you rascal, I heard you . . . Hello, Girlie—aha, she knows I'm coming in to see her master all right. Morning!"

And there entered, carrying hat, gloves, cane, and morning newspaper, the tenant of the rooms above, Mr. George Hope.

He was a couple of years younger than young Wye, of his old regiment; he was a smaller-made man, and he bowed. Men liked "little Hope"; men delighted in his flow of talk, his practical jokes, his chirping spirit . . . Men pronounced him "a thoroughly good little chap." He was, in short, a man's man. Which does not always mean a man whom women loathe.

In this case, however, it did. You could not find a woman who would not instinctively wrinkle up her nose at the name of "that little horror, Mr. Hope." Pathetic? Not at all. To this type has been granted by the mercy of providence the unshatterable illusion that all women like and that many women love him.

"Aha," he began as he faced the attractive figure in the bathrobe. "Here we are, atired as a bridegroom cometh forth, eh? I've come to trouble you, Wye, for that fiver!"

"Fiver?" repeated his friend blankly.

"Yes, the fiver you owe me on that bet. You've lost!" Little Hope tapped the paper he held. "Just saw it here! Splendid! Hand it over, old thing!"

"What d'you mean—"

"Hob, yold humbug. You know perfectly

well," exulted little Hope. "Bet you on Armistice day that you'd get yourself engaged to be married before you'd been out of the army two years. Now what about it? What meets my astonished gaze this morning over the bacon and eggs?" He whisked open the paper and began to read—"A marr—"

"O, shut up, man, shut up. Haven't I just seen it myself?"

"Seen it? Well, I should jolly well hope you had. Expect you've been gloating over your bliss ever since you leapt out of your bath this morning. Kept it quiet, old thing, haven't you?" Little Hope rattled on. "Dark horse touch, eh? . . . But seriously, my dear old basket of fruit, I was thundering glad to see it. Old Wye fixed up, I thought. Jove! That's fine. Unexpected, really; but still, just what he wants. Something to buck him up a bit. Put some more get into him. Bring out the best that's in him! A rattling good husband for any girl, it—What are you looking so hard-boiled about?"

"I'm merely waiting," said young Wye with boding patience, "until you finish and I can get a word in."

"That's all right, tell us about her. Sob it all out on my shoulder!"

"You ass, there's nothing to sob. Anyhow, not what you think," retorted young Wye vigorously. "Some idiot's been trying to be funny, that's all. There's too much chapter and verse about it for it to be just a mistake."

"Mistake, what do you mean by mistake?" "This dashed announcement." The glossy head with its gray streaks was jerked towards the newspaper in Hope's hand.

Hope's jaw dropped. "Mean to say you aren't engaged after all?"

"I'm not thinking of it."

Hope eyed him. "Just a rumor, then?"

"Rumor? Just a lie!"

"No smoke without fire," suggested little Hope. "How did it get about? Surely we've passed the dear old days when one couldn't sit out every dance with the same girl without being asked one's intentions—"

"Lord," flung out young Wye. "I don't even know the lady these people have fixed me up with!"

"Don't know her," incredulously from little Hope. "D'you mean you've never even seen this young woman of yours?"

"I have just seen her." Young Wye stared frowning at the name coupled in that paragraph with his own. "Sybil Ashton . . . Miss Sybil Ashton . . . I met her at a dance in the country at a house where I was taken down by some people. Just once. I'd forgotten . . ."

"Not pretty, then?"

"O, yes, quite. A nice girl, too. Particularly nice girl, I thought. Pretty voice, good neck and shoulders in evening dress; soft blue eyes; that sort of thing. But—"

I never saw her again from that day to this. And now here's this!" He kicked his own copy of the paper that lay on the carpet.

"A bit extraordinary, isn't it? Dashed if I know how—"

Little Hope gave his loud, unvarying laugh.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do? Contradict it at once, of course, I—"

"Pp—RING!" went off that bell again; again the interlude in which the impassive and invaluable Frith told his accustomed tale to yet another congratulating friend.

"Delighted, are they? Shows that all your pals have been praying for you! And what," asked little Hope, who was ever a mass of that seething curiosity only found, we are told, in the feminine sex, "what about the lady? What will she have to say about her unsuspected fiancé, d'you suppose?"

The driven fiancé put forward no theory, merely grunting, "My boots, Frith."

Little Hope grinned. "In such a rush to see her?"

"Ass. It's the manager of that paper that I'm in the rush to see . . . Quick as you can, Frith—please . . . And if anybody else rings up . . ."

"PPPrrrr!" from the telephone bell—"let 'em ring!"

To those at the Post offices who informed him that they did not know if the manager were to be seen, Mr. Arthur Wye replied curtly, "He'll see me."

On he strode, and to the innermost sanctum, where, his knock being unanswered, he found himself in the presence of a big roll-top desk and of two persons so engrossed that they did not for a moment notice the intruder's entrance.

The manager, a man of the large, overbearing type that almost inevitably turns timid as a hare in the hands of any woman, was acting true to type. There he sat, quailing. In front of his desk a young woman was standing up to bully him.

Her back was towards young Wye as he entered. A shapely back; supple, straight-shouldered, well-fitted by a light gray coat—and expressive, in every line, of indignation. The tensest anger rang out, too, in the girl's voice that was exclaiming:

"Infamous, I call it! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves—"

"But—" deprecated the manager.

The girl ran on. "And I'm astonished that a paper of your repute should have permitted itself a piece of such—such criminal carelessness."

"Cheers!" thought young Wye, appreciatively. "Here's somebody else being let down somehow by these rotters. 'Infamous!' That's the stuff to give 'em. What a stunning girl. I wonder who she—"

She wheeled, giving him a full view of her face. An uncommonly pretty face; cheeks aflame with pink fire, eyes like blazing sapphires . . . O, topping . . .

For an instant the young man did not realize that he'd ever seen the face before. Then a quick further flame lighted it up, and she exclaimed, aghast—

"You?"

At the same time young Wye gasped, "Good Lord, it's Miss Ashton herself. . . ."

The manager, beholding a man to deal with, here ceased to quail, prepared to hear. Glaring at young Wye he rapped out:

"I said I was engaged!"

"You said," took up the girl swiftly, "that I was engaged!"

"That we were engaged," amended young Wye, taking a step forward. "Now, sir, what do you mean by that?" He tapped the paper in his hand, folded at the obnoxious

paragraph. "What do you mean by it?"

"Mean—"

"Yes! D'you know that all my—her—our friends will have read this? D'you realize that every soul who knows this young lady or knows me will have food for gossip for a month of Sundays? Already my telephone's got worn out with idiots trying to congratulate me—"

"So has ours!" burst in the lady, obviously far too indignant still to feel any embarrassment. "And people have telegraphed! And my relations in the country will all be sitting down and writing reams, all on account of this—"

"But—but—but—" began the manager, requaling and lifting a hand. "My dear young lady—"

A glance from the blazing sapphires seared him as he sat.

Slightly more temperately, young Wye took up the tale. "We shall be the laughing stock of London. Great Scott! I'd like to know—would both like to know what you've got to say for yourself? Personally I don't see that you've a leg to stand on. What explanation can you possibly offer—"

"Explanation!" retorted the manager, purple to the collar. "Why—why, you yourself, madam!" He turned to that girlish incarnation of fury. "You yourself apparently sent the notice in to be inserted."

"I?" Petrified, the girl gazed from him to the young man. "He says I sent in the announcement?"

"How dare you make such a suggestion about a lady?" young Wye burst in impetuously. "You'll be saying next that I put it in!"

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name, sir!"

"You seem to know plenty about my business, anyway. My name is Wye, Mr. Arthur Wye. And I advise you to be careful what you say about my—my friends sending things in to your rag of a newspaper."

"But—my dear sir! It's surely customary for the lady's people to insert any announcement of a forthcoming marr—"

"That's not going to help you, so don't sit there arguing and splitting hairs with me," retorted young Wye, spurred by the look of helpless indignation that lighted up the lovely face so near him. "However it ever happened, you've managed to cause very serious annoyance to a lady—"

"But—"

"To say nothing of the position in which you've placed me by this precious announcement of yours!"

"I—"

"You'll apologize, and pretty handsomely, too, when you publish the contradiction of this—this malicious rumor. Further, I've a dashed good mind to bring an action for libel against you!"

"And I," declared the girl, "shall bring another!"

With which curtain line she made a not ineffective exit, young Wye holding the office door open for his alleged fiancée. Together they reached the top of the stairs. Together they paused, each with a look of deprecatory appeal. Together they began, "I say, I'm so dreadfully sorry—"

Then, together, they burst out laughing.

He exclaimed: "Well, who'd have thought where we'd meet again, at that cheery dance when we did meet! Have you seen anything of those people lately, Miss Ashton?"

Miss Ashton said: "No; they were only friends of my friends who took me. It was just a chance, my going to their house—"

"And they're sure to write and say how glad they are it was at their house we met!" he laughed ruefully. "Good Lord, there's no end to the aspects of this awful mess that I've landed you into—"

"You haven't landed me—"

"Somehow I feel it's my fault—"

"O, it's the newspaper's fault," said the girl.

Said the man: "If there were only anything I could do . . . Anyway, if you'll tell me the form you'd like the contradiction to take in the evening papers—I say, we can't discuss that here on these steps. . . . Is it too early for lunch? Well, then, if you're not doing anything for the moment can't we get hold of a taxi and find some quiet spot where we can sit down and talk this over?"

If young Wye had not been thoroughly disgruntled by all this extravagance he would not have selected, as a quiet spot for talk, the park on a fine morning of midseason.

To his horrified mind it appeared that the park immediately became populated by all the people who knew him, her, or both.

They, these friends, all saw. They all smiled—meaning smiles and full of approval. "Such a delightful young couple!" could be read in every glance. And how like fate to arrange that, on this day of all others, those people who had given that dance and whom they had not seen since then should appear in the flower walk and should bear down upon the couple before they had so much as paid the pennies for their chairs.

"Look, look! They're coming to speak to us. Pretend you didn't see them," whispered Sybil Ashton to her companion, who had, as a matter of fact, not seen. "Let's pretend that we're going—O, yes—to talk to that old lady over there."

She hustled him in the direction of a white haired dowager with black lace dripping off her Victorian mushroom hat—who immediately lifted a shrewd, startled face upon the two young people racing toward her down the path and exclaimed arrestingly:

"Arthur!"

Out of the frying pan into the fire.

"Granny!" muttered the young man, turning searing wax red . . . they pulled up.

"Good-morning, bad boy," said the old lady brightly. "I'm glad to see you've the grace to come up and apologize at once. What manners! Letting your poor old granny see it in the Post before she'd heard a word! Then telling your village idiot Frith to say you'd fed the country! Well, perhaps he didn't say quite that, but that's the way he mumbles. Deplorably stupid fellow! Change your man, Arthur. Change your man. Not worth while before you're married, I suppose? And this—"

—with a keen, approving glance at the flushed girl before her—this is the young lady. My dear, I am delighted to see you. Two little black gloved hands clasped Sybil's.

"You're so like that wonderfully handsome young man, your grandfather. We had rather a flirtation even in Simla—O, some years ago. When are you coming to see me? Come and have lunch in Mount street. Come now—"

Young Wye broke in desperately, aware that this was neither the time nor the place to enter into long winded explanations with deaf old ladies.

"Awfully sorry, grannie . . . another day . . . tomorrow if we may, perhaps. . . . Promised to have lunch with—her people . . . hate to break away like this, but as a matter of fact we're behind time now. . . . Good-by, grannie . . . forgive us, won't you? . . . If we can just grab that taxi . . ."

He grabbed it. He got in beside the girl. "I'll see you home, Miss Ashton, of course . . . And if you don't mind I'll ask if you will allow me to come in and see your people for five minutes. I'd like to explain to them that this whole blessed affair had absolutely nothing to do with—I mean, I mean, I'd hate them to imagine that there was anything in the nature of a practical joke—"

"Joke!" blankly from the girl. "You don't suppose any human being would do a thing like that for a joke, do you?"

"Er—O, I suppose not," returned the young man all the more hastily because a sudden suspicion had just assailed him.

A practical joke. . . . If it were that! . . . On the part of some one he knew? Who was always full of booby traps and "scores"? Whose chaff was occasionally—yes, occasionally—on the "off" side? Who had come in this morning specially to rag about that announcement of the engagement? . . . Surely he could not have been such an unmitigated boonder?

Good Lord!

How frightful if it did turn out to be all the doing of little Hope. . . . Impossible! Yet—who else could it have been?

"Here we are," cried Sybil, more nervously than she had yet appeared, as the taxi pulled up.

"Auntie, this is Mr. Wye, our fellow sufferer in the matter of that—ridiculous onard in the newspaper," the girl introduced her companion bravely to the fustled looking lady who stood in the middle of a pretty drawing room as if she wondered how she'd got there. "We met at the newspaper office."

"O, Sybil, you've been there?" gasped the aunt, withdrawing her hand with a start from that of young Wye—who had never yet